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DEPT FOR ARP

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: SAUDI GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTS TO COUNTER TRIBALISM

Classified By: CG JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1 (C) SUMMARY: Information recently received by post regarding a new police initiative aimed at preventing displays of tribal affiliation on automobiles points to the SAG's continued attempts to limit the influence of tribalism.

This new police effort, combined with recent rumors of the SAG prohibiting the use of tribal names in official documents and a high-profile judicial case accusing Eastern Province (EP) officials of tribal discrimination, reinforces the difficult task facing the SAG: promoting a Saudi national identity without alienating an often tribally-minded population. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) According to post contact Ahmad al-Khathami, Assistant Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Dhahran Police Department (strictly protect), in early July 2008 Assistant Minister of Interior for National Security Prince Mohamed bin Naif (MbN) issued a Kingdom-wide directive to police departments instructing they crack down on motorists driving cars adorned with tribal paraphernalia. Al-Khathami confirmed the initiative to post in a July 19 conversation, saying that while no official law had been passed, police departments had been instructed to stop motorists driving cars decorated with tribal signs, insignias or posters, and remove the decoration. The expression of tribal identity on automobiles - whether it be through stickers with the tribe's name or the use of increasingly popular "tribal codes" in which each tribe is represented by a three-digit number - is perceived locally to be a growing phenomenon.

13. (C) This reported new directive comes at the same time as a false but widespread email circulating through Saudi inboxes, claiming that in an interview with al-Hayat newspaper, the Imam and Khateeb of the Great Mosque in Mecca Abd al-Rahman al-Sudais had stated that the Ministry of Interior, in conjunction with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, is in the process of drafting a law that will do away with tribal names in official SAG-issued documents. In an attempt to authenticate the supposed article, post contacted Hussein al-Awammi, the second-in-charge at al-Hayat's Eastern Province (EP) Branch, who denied that the article had appeared in the newspaper.

14. (C) The ongoing case of human rights activist Sheikh Mekhleef al-Shammari is a further example of the sensitivity of tribal issues. Al-Shammari claims that he applied to the Eastern Province Emirate in 2006 for a license to open a Shammar tribal council, following the lead of other tribes who had established similar fora. Al-Shammari claims that a prominent emirate official - who himself is part of a tribal council - demanded he not open the council, and asked him to sign a pledge avowing he would not do so. When al-Shammari refused, he claims the official insulted his tribe and put him in custody. Al-Shammari was held without trial in a Mabahith jail for 110 days. He has filed a judicial case seeking compensation for the material and moral damage caused by his detention; the case is currently before the EP Court

of Grievances. While the facts and judicial outcome of al-Shammari's case are still in doubt, tribalism is undoubtedly the core issue at play in one of the more high-profile judicial cases currently active in the Kingdom.

15. (C) COMMENT: While the supposed al-Hayat article seems to have been a hoax and post has heard nothing further regarding the directive from MbN to local police departments, both cases point to the continuing importance and political sensitivity surrounding the issue of tribal identity in Saudi Arabia. The reasons for a growth in tribalism and the extent of such growth remain unclear - some analysts suggest that it is a reaction to the public insecurity of the first half of the decade - but the SAG is keen on diminishing its primacy and instead promoting a Saudi national identity. The issue is one that affects Saudi culture regardless of economic strata or region. Even at Aramco, for example, despite frequent whispers of tribally-influenced hiring and promotional practices, PolOff has also been told that high-level company officials are pressured by the SAG not to use their tribal name as part of their business identity. Neither claim has been proven with anything more than anecdotes, but both serve to illustrate the perceived influence of the tribes in Saudi Arabia, and the supposed SAG reaction to the tribes' role. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED:JKINCANNON)  
GFOELLER